



# FROM BIG LEAPS TO BUILDING BRIDGES

## *From Discovering to Following Jesus*

### Post-Alpha Principle and Foundations (1)

#### **What Next?**

As the Diocese of Green Bay rolls out the Alpha course from parish leadership teams to engaged parishioners in 2018, many are asking: “What do we do after Alpha?” Here at the diocese, we’ve been asking this question and exploring viable options for over a year now.

With parishes having piloted the Alpha course for several months in the Diocese of Green Bay, and having personally visited parishes outside of the state of Wisconsin that have successfully implemented Alpha, I have found that post-Alpha practices vary from parish to parish while the basic principles do not.

The first thing to make clear is that there is no rigid or uniform post-Alpha formula among growing Alpha-based parishes; either here at the Diocese of Green Bay or throughout the world. They all do things a little differently. Just as each individual seeker has unique needs and dispositions, so too does each parish.

One thing for sure: In a post-Alpha discipleship process, a one-size-fits-all program- or a series of programs -does not exist. With that said, however, there is a set of proven principles and foundations that can help to ensure that Alpha participants successfully transition from discovering Jesus to a point of readiness where an intentional decision to follow him is viable.

Therefore, when assessing post-Alpha opportunities and how Alpha can serve as a platform to launch an effective discipleship process, an illustration of comparing big leaps to big bridges might be helpful.

#### **Big Leaps**

In the past, spiritual growth opportunities at many parishes consisted of having adults make big leaps from one program to another; sometimes with an interim period of several months. In many cases, the discipleship process was conceived as a string of activities or programs. With this, what often was lacking was an order to the discipleship process where programs- adapted to the spiritual needs of the individual -would naturally build on one another.

For instance, when a person would encounter the Risen Lord at a parish-run retreat or program, they would often ask: “I’m inspired! What’s next?” Unfortunately, in many cases, the parish did not have an answer for them. At best, these seekers-would be referred to the next program or activity. And as stated, such programs were often spaced out by several months.



The hazard of these leaps from one program to another is not difficult to imagine. What often happened was that a person, who may have been inspired at an RCIA program, parish retreat or adult faith formation program, fell in between the cracks. In other words, such persons often drifted away between parish activities and thereby became disengaged from parish life all together.

To further complicate the transition through any kind of discipleship process, adult faith formation opportunities were introduced to adults with heavy theological, ecclesiological or devotional content. Yet, many of these adults, in all likelihood, were in the initial stages of spiritual growth. As such, they needed more time to experience how Jesus Christ was relevant to their daily lives. In hindsight, we now see that it can take months, maybe years, before people are ready to cross the thresholds of trust, curiosity and openness.

Even with the help of the Holy Spirit, an acquired taste for topics such as “creed, sacraments and church” are often better realized after people’s questions about God and life have been satisfied. Recall Jesus and how he took at least three years to disciple his Apostles. It was towards the end of that three year period that their desire for the sacraments was awakened! As for us, we have not always appreciated the time required to awaken the need for the Mass and the sacraments in seekers who come to our parish. Shortcuts, in most cases, proved to be hazardous.

At this juncture, it is important to re-emphasize at least two reasons why many adults struggle to move through the discipleship process (from beginning to the latter stages): First, there is often too much time between discipleship opportunities. Second, programs and activities offered at the parish were sometimes ill-adapted to spiritual needs of people. But there is also another reason why many adults drift away from parish life: a deficit of intentional relationship-building.

### **Big Bridges**

A visual illustration might help us to better understand why our discipleship processes have to be tightened up a bit. Notice the picture of the bridge to the right. One wooden plank succeeds another so that a pedestrian can easily walk from one side to the other. Here, a safe transition is ensured. No big leaps are required to get across the chasm.



The same principle applies to the discipleship process. In order for a successful transition through a discipleship process to occur, the gaps between the “wooden planks” (e.g. discipleship opportunities) have to be eliminated as much as possible. And the best way to bind these “planks” together and eliminate the gaps in the discipleship process is an intentional effort to build relationships with Alpha participants.

Another expression for this form of ministry is the “art of accompaniment.” Here, we are not only talking about having discipleship opportunities lined up in a timely sequence after Alpha; but we are also striving to build relationships with participants during the Alpha course and in the post-Alpha phase.

Keep in mind that social ties are not the only incentive for conversion; but they are a strong one! And people will often return to a parish because of meaningful relationships. Above all, people desire security, love and acceptance in a community. And if this desire is fulfilled by a relationship with Christ and friendships with other disciples (i.e. parish leaders and parishioners), then the transition from discovering Christ to an intentional decision to follow him in everyday life is all the more assured. With this, it is important that Alpha leaders and helpers make a sincere effort in identifying one or two participants during the Alpha course; this, in order to accompany them through each of the four discipleship stages (1. Discover Jesus 2. Follow Jesus 3. Worship Jesus 4. Share Jesus).

### General Action Items

While you are in the preparation phases for the next Alpha course, consider a few things:

1. Explore discipleship opportunities for the post-Alpha phase (not just one): this, so that work of the Holy Spirit can continue for each participant after the Alpha course has concluded.
2. For now, assess pre-existing programs, retreats and spiritual activities at your parish that would make for good discipleship opportunities. If possible, schedule them soon after the Alpha course has concluded.
3. Know that offering just one discipleship opportunity may not be a good fit for everyone who has gone through Alpha. Some people may need more time seeing how Jesus Christ relates to their everyday life. Others may be ready to go deeper into their faith.
4. Accompaniment personalizes the discipleship process for people. However, the challenge at any given parish is that there are likely to be more participants to accompany than there are available Alpha leaders or helpers. Still, to develop relationships with a few people is better than not trying at all.

Keep in mind that the purpose of this *Post-Alpha Principles and Foundations* article is to get us thinking about a paradigm shift. What we don't want is to create a discipleship process where people have to make big leaps from one activity to another. On the contrary, we want a discipleship process where *discovering Jesus, following Jesus, worshiping Jesus and sharing Jesus* is as easy as crossing a bridge!

More articles and resources on best practices for the post-Alpha phase are forthcoming!!!

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